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ENGLISH AND THE DISCIPLINE OF IDEAS

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I chanced recently to be glancing over a book on a subject very remote from my present topic, namely, a book on Japanese Buddhism, and I read among other things that several centuries ago there was a sect of Japanese Buddhism known as the Way of Hardships, and that shortly after there arose another sect known as the Easy Way which at once gained great popularity and tended to supplant the Way of Hardships. But the Japanese Way of Hardships is itself an easy way if one compares it with the original way of Buddha. One can follow indeed very clearly the process by which Buddhist doctrine descended gradually from the austere and almost inaccessible height on which it had been placed by its founder to the level of the prayer mill. One might read in the papers not long ago that as a final improvement some of the prayer mills in Thibet are to be operated by electricity. The tendency illustrated is not, I believe, confined to the Orient. The man who hopes to save society by turning the crank of a legislative mill may call himself a Christian, but he is probably as remote from the true spirit of Jesus as the man who hopes to perform a religious act by pressing an electric button is from the true spirit of Buddha. What stands forth plainly in both East and West is man's proneness, unless this proneness is counteracted by unceasing vigilance, to follow the lines of least, or, at all events, of lesser, resistance.

How far is this human proneness manifest today in American education? As a matter of fact, the complaint is often heard at present that there is an increasing exodus from the difficult and disciplinary subjects and a rush into the soft subjects. One good sign is that those who stand for the difficult and disciplinary subjects, e.g., the professors of physics and the professors of the ancient classics, are coming more and more to see that they must co-operate and not work at cross-purposes, as they have done only too often in the past, if they are to make head against the drift toward softness. The question arises as to the position of English in this struggle between the more and the less disciplinary subjects. How far is its present popularity, as compared with Greek and Latin, a case of the supplanting of a way of hardships by an easy way? It has been my business for many years past in connection with certain courses I am giving in comparative literature to trace the great naturalistic movement that got fairly under way in the eighteenth century and has been tending more and more to displace the two great traditions, Christian and classical, that had prevailed in education, as elsewhere, up to that time. Now this naturalistic movement in the midst of which we are still living is twofold, partly utilitarian and partly sentimental, and the grounds on which not only English but other modern languages have triumphed over the ancient classics have also been to no small extent utilitarian and sentimental. English appeals to us as our mother-tongue, and at the same time some training in English is admittedly useful. We are seeing again the rapid extension of Spanish in our schools at the present time on grounds that are plainly utilitarian, grounds that have little relation to the cultural value of Spanish. The question I propose to consider is in what way one may justify the study of English on cultural and disciplinary, and not merely on sentimental or utilitarian, grounds. My own conviction is that if English is to be thus justified it must be primarily by what I am terming the discipline of ideas.¹

¹I have inserted at this point a number of sentences from an address that I gave at the Dartmouth sesquicentennial celebration on a topic very similar to the present one, namely, "On Teaching the Intellectual Content of Literature."

As a matter of fact one hears it commonly said nowadays that literature may be rescued from the philologist on the one hand and the mere dilettante on the other by an increase of emphasis on its intellectual content, that the teaching of literature, if it is to have virility, must be above all the teaching of ideas. This insistence on ideas, sound so far as it goes, needs, if it is to be really fruitful, to be supplemented by a careful analysis of the kind of ideas that should be taught if the humanities are to be rehabilitated. Aristotle says that the most important factor in maintaining any particular form of government is the general ethical conception or *ethos* that is given through education to the young. If the *ethos* does not coincide with the form of government, that government is doomed. A question worth asking is whether our present system of education is doing as much as it might to create an *ethos* in close accord with our existing form of government, i.e., a constitutional democracy.

Has our emancipation, in short, from the somewhat narrow traditionalism of the old American college and the attainment of encyclopedic fulness of knowledge that has marked the rise of universities been achieved without any sacrifice of the one thing needful—the sound ethical standards that the old-fashioned American college with all its limitations did do something to promote? The change that has been taking place in our education is, it should be noted, not simply a modernizing and adjusting to new conditions of the old college curriculum, but the substitution in no small degree of an entirely new spirit. The old education aimed at training for wisdom, a wisdom to be achieved in the breast of the individual. The new education aims rather, in President Eliot's phrase, at training for service and training for power. The old education was partly humanistic, partly religious; the new education is humanitarian, concerned, that is, less with making wise individuals than with improving society as a whole, and this humanitarianism is itself only an aspect of the naturalistic movement of which I have spoken, that began to triumph decisively over tradition in the middle of the eighteenth century. One cannot help harboring certain doubts as to whether this more humanitarian type of education tends as much as the old religious

and humanistic type to create an *ethos* in accord with our existing institutions.

As a matter of fact, the complaint is beginning to be heard that our institutions of learning are turning out, not men with sound ethical standards, but sociological dreamers. The most marked trait of the sociological dreamer, and that from the very dawn of the humanitarian movement in the eighteenth century, has been his inordinate interest in the under-dog. "All institutions," says Condorcet, for example, "ought to have for their aim the physical, intellectual, and moral amelioration of the poorest and most numerous class."

One may ask what all this has to do with the discipline of ideas. My reply is: Everything. If a teacher is humanitarian, with a predominant interest in the underdog, he will at once find himself out of touch with most of the great figures of both ancient and modern literature. I have my doubts as to whether a classical teacher will teach his subject with the fullest understanding and effectiveness if he himself—and I happen to know of a number of such classical teachers—is of socialistic or semi-Bolshevistic leanings. What has just been said applies almost as much to the modern as to the ancient classics. Milton was not an "uplifter," nor was Shakespeare; they are open rather to the charge of not having been sufficiently solicitous for the underdog. The issue that lurks in the background of the whole discussion, and which must be faced squarely, is whether our education, especially our higher education, is to be qualitative and intensive or quantitative and extensive. Those who are filled with concern for the lot of humanity as a whole, especially for the less fortunate portions of it, are wont nowadays to call themselves idealists. We should at least recognize that ideals in this sense are not the same as standards and that they are often indeed the opposite of standards. It would be easy to mention institutions of learning in this country that are at present engaged in breaking down standards in the name of ideals. It seems democratic and therefore ideal that the largest possible number should partake of the advantages of higher education, and for this and other reasons there is, as we all know, a constant temptation to let down the bars. I am just in receipt

of a letter from a professor of a state institution of the Middle West mentioning an enrolment of 2,300 students in Freshman English, and at the same time raising the question how far this enrolment means the sacrifice of quality to quantity. We should not forget that in the long run our democracy will be judged by its ability to achieve high standards of quality at least as much as by its so-called ideals.

Three or four years ago a distinguished Frenchman, M. Hovelacque, published an article on America in the *Revue de Paris* in which he maintained that the essential weakness of our American civilization lay in the failure of our education to produce any equivalent of the superior man of Confucius or the *καλὸς κἀγαθὸς* of the Greeks. Later M. Hovelacque accompanied Joffre on his trip to this country and gave out to the daily press glowing interviews in which he praised us for our idealism. Now that we are big and powerful we are sure to be flattered, and it is therefore all the more important that we should not flatter ourselves. If we are told that it is not democratic to strive to produce the superior man, we should reply with Aristotle that the remedy for democracy is not more democracy, but that, on the contrary, if we wish a democracy that is to endure we should temper it with its opposite—with the idea of quality and selection. True democracy consists not in lowering the standard but in giving everybody, so far as possible, a chance of measuring up to the standard. If we are to judge by the experience of the past, the number of those who will measure up to high standards will not, even under the most favorable circumstances, be large in proportion to the mass. Sooner or later every honest teacher, no matter how inclusive in his sympathies, is forced to recognize the truth contained in the saying of Confucius that "you cannot carve rotten wood"; that comparatively few, in short, have either aptitude or inclination for wisdom.

These are the truths that we are tending to lose sight of in the present age of naturalistic and humanitarian expansion with its exaltation of quantity and numbers. We need just now to stress the qualitative and selective idea in our education if it is to produce leaders equal to the task of preserving through the

present revolutionary era our birthright of liberty. The real crux of the situation, now that our traditional supports have largely failed us, is to get our humanistic quality and selection in a more positive and critical, in a word, in a more modern, fashion than heretofore.

A great many people are, as a matter of fact, setting up in these days as humanists. But it is right here that the discipline of ideas is needed if we are not to fall into confusion at the very start. When we consider carefully what many of our so-called humanists stand for, we find that they are not humanists but humanitarians. A humanism that is not sharply discriminated from humanitarianism, of which it is in many respects the exact opposite, is largely meaningless; and to discriminate properly between humanism and humanitarianism will be found to involve a severe intellectual discipline. Humanism is only one of a large class of words that call aloud at present for definition. In fact, as Socrates is reported to have said, the very beginning of genuine culture, especially in an age that has discarded traditional standards, is the scrutiny of general terms. Let us take the general term that is used to sum up our whole modern emancipation: the term liberty itself. Have we applied a scrutiny sufficiently searching as yet to this general term? In his projected "History of Liberty" Lord Acton was planning to begin with a hundred different definitions of liberty. I am not sure that any one of the hundred would have been sufficiently well grounded in the facts of human nature and at the same time in accord with what I have called the modern spirit. I can at least indicate in brief the nature of the problem. What seems to me to be driving our whole civilization toward the abyss at present is a one-sided conception of liberty, a conception that is purely centrifugal, that would get rid of all outer control and then evade or deny openly the need of achieving inner control.

I have just been reading a volume by a young instructor in government at Harvard, in which he tends to justify what the French call administrative syndicalism, recently exemplified in the policemen's strike. His final appeal is to liberty and conscience. One might suppose at first that one has to do with another Milton,

but on close scrutiny one finds that Milton and this instructor mean very different things by liberty and conscience. The Miltonic liberty involves the inner obeisance of the spirit to a law that is set above the mere emancipated impulses of the natural man. Those who stand for the purely expansive and naturalistic conception of liberty are wont, as I have said, to call themselves idealists and to assert that the present evils of the body politic are due to a lack of their type of idealism. I myself hold the homely and unpopular view that these evils are due rather to a violation of the Ten Commandments. The special failing of some of our more advanced idealists would seem to be their slight regard for the commandment: *Thou shalt not steal*. For the Golden Age to which they invite us can be achieved only by a program of plunder and loot. Here is an extreme example from the manifesto put forth the other day by the Federation of Russian Workers of America: "Far beyond the corpses of heroes, beyond the blood-covered barricades, beyond all the terrors of civil war there already shines for us the magnificent, beautiful form of man without a God, without a master and free of authority. We declare war upon God and religious fables. We are atheists. Not to the happiness of citizenship do we call the workers, we call them to liberty—to absolute liberty." This passage puts us on the track of the violation of another commandment even more important perhaps than the commandment against stealing—the commandment, namely, against idolatry; for thus to glorify man in his natural and unmodified self is no less surely, even if less obviously, idolatry than actually to bow down before a graven image. One must include in one's definition of liberty the centripetal element, the element of control that will raise one above this humanitarian idolatry, if one is to be a true liberal. The struggle that will determine the fate of occidental civilization—and this struggle is likely to take place above all in America—is not, as is often assumed, between liberals on the one hand and mere reactionaries and traditionalists on the other, but between the true and the sham liberals. At present, in the absence of a sufficiently stringent discipline of ideas, the sham liberals are having things too much their own way.

Observe that the Bolshevist vision of man glorified by emancipation from both inner and outer control has much in common with the vision of liberty that one finds in Shelley. If this view of liberty is pestilential nonsense when put forth by the Federation of Russian Workers of America, it is pestilential nonsense when arrayed in the gorgeous lyrical iridescences of *Prometheus Unbound*. What an opportunity, in any case, for the teacher who wishes to put ideas into his teaching to compare the liberty of Milton, based on a conception of life that is partly humanistic and partly biblical, with the naturalistic and humanitarian liberty of Shelley.

Comparisons of the kind I have in mind imply background, and it is becoming more and more difficult under existing conditions to get background. The more advanced liberals of the naturalistic and humanitarian type not only spurn the past but barely tolerate the present; the true home of their spirit is that vast, windy abode, the future. Even in its less advanced stages this temper leads to what one is tempted to call a cheap contemporaneousness. Most of us are acquainted with the type of teacher who, instead of building up background in his students, is inclined to set them to studying opinions on current events in the columns of the *New Republic*. The result, so far as the tried and tested masterpieces of the past are concerned, is an increasing illiteracy. An English instructor at Harvard told me—I hope that he was exaggerating—that out of one class of 43 students only four knew anything about the Book of Job! This is a situation that seems to justify some of the most gloomy sentiments of Job—with a few from Jeremiah thrown in.

This ignorance of standard literature on the part of the younger generation is becoming so obvious that it is likely to lead to action in the near future on the part of our college faculties. In fact, I may perhaps say without any undue betrayal of academic secrets that the whole situation has recently been under discussion by the divisions of ancient and modern literature at Harvard. The conclusions that have been reached thus far may undergo modification; they have not in any case been passed on by the faculty and so are not to be regarded as official.¹ At all events, the present

¹The whole plan has since received the approval of the faculty.

intention is to require of all undergraduates who are concentrating in either ancient or modern literature a knowledge of the Bible and Shakespeare to be tested as a part of a general examination at the end of their college course. In addition, every undergraduate concentrating in modern language is to be tested as a part of the same general examination on his knowledge, to be obtained either in the original or through translation, of at least two important ancient classics; and the undergraduate concentrating in the ancient languages will be tested in like manner on two important modern classics. The students are encouraged to do this reading if possible during the summer vacation, and at all events independently of their regular courses. The ancient classics from which students may select will probably be: Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Horace, and Virgil; the moderns (in addition to Shakespeare): Dante, Cervantes, Molière, Goethe, Chaucer, and Milton. Note that this scheme not only aims to give the student the background of standard reading that he now so often lacks, but emphasizes another very important point, namely, the underlying unity of literary study. The ancient and modern humanities will stand or fall together. Those who are taking advantage of present utilitarian and sentimental tendencies to promote the modern languages at the expense of the ancient are engaging in shortsighted tactics. It is naïve to suppose that the utilitarians or sentimentalist who have no sense of the cultural importance of Greek and Latin will in the long run allow a serious place to what is truly liberalizing in the study of English or any other modern language.

I have said enough, I trust, to make plain what I mean by the discipline of ideas. I have expressed the belief that our most urgent problem just now is how to preserve in a positive and critical form the soul of truth in the two great traditions, classical and Christian, that are crumbling as mere dogma; and I have said that the first step in working out a positive and critical humanism in particular is to define one's general terms, above all the term liberty, and that the ideas for which the general terms stand should be studied not abstractly but concretely as reflected in main literary currents and in the works of great authors. This

involves in turn the building up of background, not merely in the English and modern classics, but in those of Greece and Rome. Thus to study English with reference to its intellectual content will do more than anything to make it a serious cultural discipline. It will then be possible to refute those who look upon the present popularity of English as only an instance of the familiar human proclivity to turn from a way of hardships to an easy way. Teachers of English have, in any case, a choice to make between a humanistic conception of their subject and the current naturalistic and humanitarian conceptions. If they assume the more qualitative and selective attitude that the humanist recommends, and disregard certain equalitarian fallacies that are now being preached in the name of democracy, they can probably do more than any other body of teachers to check the present drift toward illiteracy and at the same time help to build up the complex of civilized ideas and habits, the *ethos*, as Aristotle calls it, that is necessary, especially in the leaders, if we are to be true liberals, equal to the task of preserving our present free institutions.